

INTRODUCTION

"The Six Degrees of Regional Planning..."

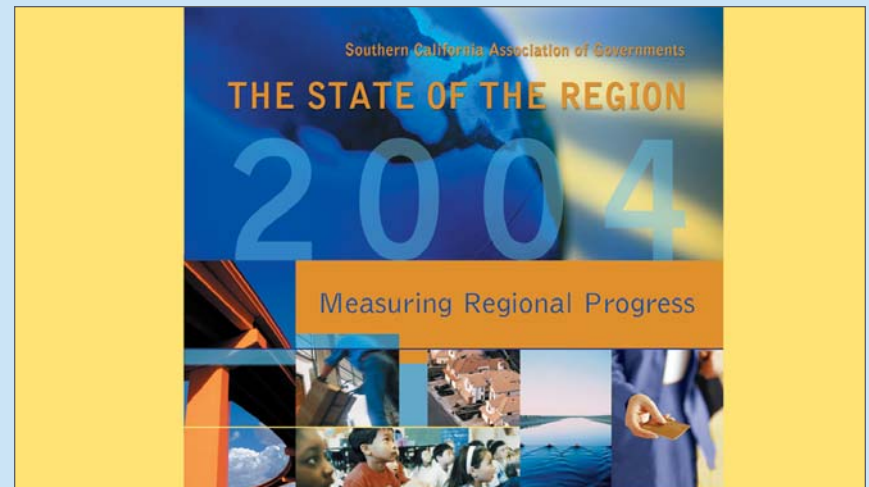
by Rick Bishop

In 1994, a group of college students, obviously with too much time on their hands, came up with a game they called "The Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon". The game is based on the conceit of the John Guare play and movie adaptation "Six Degrees of Separation". The game postulates that we are all connected by six or fewer stages of circumstance or acquaintance.

In substituting the word "Separation" with "Kevin Bacon," the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" founders hypothesized that Bacon might be the center of the universe, at least when connecting actors. The students discovered that if you use Bacon as an end point, you can link him in six degrees (steps) or less to almost any other performer. For instance, Kevin Bacon links to Kevin Costner in one swift link: Both were in the movie "JFK." Julia Louis-Dreyfus of TV's Seinfeld, however, takes all six steps to make a chain. She was in Christmas Vacation with Randy Quaid, who was in Major League II with Tom Berenger, who was in Shattered with Greta Scacchi, who was in Presumed Innocent with Harrison Ford, who was in Raiders of the Lost Ark with Karen Allen, who was in Animal House with – guess who – Kevin Bacon.

In a strange but related way, so it is with SCAG's annual "State of the Region" report, which has been published each year since 1998. Crammed with a plethora of information regarding a variety of topics ranging from economy to employment to housing to crime to education to air quality, there is at least something in each and every report to catch the eye of folks interested in these issues. But reviewing the report is often a cursory exercise, with focused attention to any individual section paid only by those whose job is related to that specific component. Rarely is much time given to reading about performance in those sectors that just "don't affect me" or "have no real bearing on my profession or industry."

But using "six degrees" logic, it's not hard to illustrate that individual regional issues such as the ones presented in the State of the Region report are inextricably linked to one another, and that (*insert your particular topic of interest in the State of the Region report here*) is, in fact, the center of the



regional issues universe. And although the issues and accompanying discussion presented in the State of the Region report are segregated and compartmentalized, there should be no intention on behalf of the reader to view the report in the same manner. Instead, we should all seek to identify the inter-relationships between and among report categories, and look for what might appear to be unrelated discussions in the report to explain trends reported elsewhere. Sometimes you won't need many "degrees of separation" to find these linkages. Other times you'll need all six degrees, which lends credence to the notion of the inter-relatedness among the topics presented in this year's State of the Region. In the end, virtually any topic discussed in the report can really become the "most important in the universe" around which all other data are linked. Let's try it.

The region's real personal income per capita has continued a decline that started decades ago. Among the top 17 metropolitan areas in the United States, the SCAG region now ranks dead last in this category, trailing areas like Detroit, Cleveland, Houston, Sacramento, Miami, and Cincinnati. Disturbingly, in 1970 the SCAG region ranked 4th among the 17 regions in real personal income per capita, and was 7th as recently as 1990. Supporting data from the report iterates that nearly one in every six persons in the SCAG region lives in poverty, the highest poverty rate in the nation.

It's no surprise that this data leads to a **second degree of separation** – housing affordability. The State of the Region report discusses how Southern California is fast-becoming one of the least affordable housing markets in the state and nation. In the six-county region only about 1/3 of the region's households can now afford to purchase a median-priced home, which now stands at well above \$500,000 in Orange County and more than \$350,000 in Riverside County. With the region set to add approximately 6 million more residents by year 2025 in addition to the 17 million of us already here, it's a good thing that approximately 400,000 new homes were constructed during the 1990's, right? Well, maybe not, considering that in actuality 633,000 new homes were needed to accommodate the 1.9 million additional residents who settled here during that 10-year period. So the inability to provide enough new homes is a **third degree of separation**, a prominent contributor to the region's skyrocketing price of housing and related decline in housing affordability. In essence, the region's demand for housing is rapidly outstripping the supply, and home prices are increasing so rapidly that the affordability index continues to plummet. Coupled with the first degree of separation fact regarding the region's slide in real personal per capita income, a troubling picture of potential future home ownership – a key indicator of economic health in any region – supported by second and third degrees of separation emerges.

A **fourth degree of separation** might be found in noting that, to no one's real surprise, transit boardings have increased slightly in recent years in the SCAG region. On the surface, it appears to make sense that if the region's per capita income declines and rate of poverty grows, the discretion of persons to select a travel mode of choice might be limited. As a result transit becomes a favored – and often the only viable – means of travel for those who cannot afford to or desire not to prioritize the purchase, operation, and maintenance of an automobile. Thus, it makes sense that transit boardings in the region are on the increase.

But if more of us are riding transit, why has the region's air quality generally worsened during the last few years? Automobile emissions are the source of approximately 70% of the air pollution in Southern California; certainly, with the region's dramatic population increase come additional cars and trucks on the road. But a potential **fifth degree of separation** is revealed in the fact that older model vehicles – which comprise only about 10% of the region's cars and trucks but do not have modern emissions-regulating technologies and are exempt from smog-check programs – account for

approximately 90% of the vehicle emissions spewed into the region's atmosphere. Could it be that other cost considerations, such as those discussed above, are contributing to the regional population's inability and/or unwillingness to more quickly replace the aging, heavier polluting fleet of automobiles, and thus plays a major factor in region's recent air quality decline?



All this can lead to the center of this particular discussion's universe, and a **sixth degree of separation** as presented in the State of the Region report. Among the nine largest metropolitan regions in the United States, the SCAG region ranks last in the percentage of adults who have attained at least a high school diploma. Math and reading test scores among 8th graders have declined in most SCAG-area counties during the last year, and high school dropout rates increased in four of the six counties. Of those finishing high school, fewer are completing courses required for entrance to the University of California and California State University educational systems. Which leads to an interesting question: Will our future workforce have what it takes to help turn some of these trends around?

In reviewing the 2004 State of the Region report, take some extra time this year to look for clues provided in all of the report's categories that might help explain or influence those areas in the report that hold your particular interest. Chances are that your issue – the center of your universe – has many degrees of separation with other components discussed in this important regional document.

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